

Iowa Farmers' Markets/EBT Wireless Project

In late 2004, the Iowa Food Policy Council, commissioned by then Governor Tom Vilsack, urged the Department of Human Services (DHS) to explore how to expand the Food Assistance Program to farmers' markets. DHS determined that the wireless project:

- Would not re-create the stigma associated with using the old Food Assistance paper coupons.
- Would not utilize tokens/paper scrip as a very high percentage of market managers were also vendors at the market and were selling their own products. They reported that they did not have time to reimburse farmers, track the tokens and maintain accounting reports.
- Would accept credit and debit cards as well as EBT. This would help reduce the stigma issue for the Food Assistance households.
- Would reimburse farmers for monthly fees minus the commercial transaction fees or any other fee not directly related to SNAP EBT. *(Prior to November 1, 2007, Iowa Farm Bureau paid the commercial transaction fees on behalf of the farmers.)*
- Would allow farmers the ability to use the wireless device 7 days a week, at the farm, at a pick-your-own operation, etc.

In 2009, there were 118 farmers' markets with at least one farmer who could accept EBT/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For 2009, there were a total of 220 authorized farmers' markets in Iowa.

DHS has funding for 167 farmers to participate in the EBT Wireless Project. DHS no longer purchases wireless terminals due to the cost and expected lifetime of the device, which is about three years. Most farmers are seasonal and operate 5-6 months a year. DHS prefers to use rental wireless devices for those seasonal vendors. For year-round vendors, DHS will make available a 'free' device or a formerly purchased device, if one is available.



DHS offers the EBT Wireless Project to any farmer certified to accept SNAP and provides the farmer with signage and wireless equipment. DHS pays for mandatory monthly fees as well as the EBT transaction fee. DHS gains many participating farmers from referrals from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) or when they view the DHS website.

The Iowa EBT Wireless Project has dramatically increased sales each year for farmers. Total sales by farmer vary based on what they sell, the number of days per week they sell their products, the number of months they go to market, signage, and their own marketing technique. Two Iowa farmers had wireless sales of over \$75,000, but many had sales of less than \$500.

The challenge, for every market and state, is how to increase SNAP sales at farmers' markets. DHS made great strides in 2009. EBT sales were 48% higher in 2009 than 2008 and the number of EBT transactions were up by 41%. The increase can be attributed to several factors:

- Large increase in the number of SNAP households.
- DHS promotion of farmers' markets by creating and distributing farmers' markets posters to every DHS office, creating and distributing monthly newsletters for farmers, and routinely informing farmers of SNAP policies.
- Annual brochure display at DHS office which identifies farmers with wireless equipment and the markets that they will be selling at for the current year.
- Annual DHS visits to several farmers' markets and printing a story about that market with pictures.
- Posting video on DHS website which promotes the benefits of farmers' markets as well as the benefits of eating locally grown food.

DHS is fortunate to work with great market managers, the Iowa Farmers' Market Association, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. Iowa markets are innovative and communicate frequently with DHS to see how they can help meet their goal of increasing SNAP participation at farmers' markets. For example, Des Moines/Drake Neighborhood provides \$.50 coupons to all visitors at their market and the Davenport/Freight House Market offers free educational classes on canning and freezing of produce. SNAP households are eligible to receive free canning equipment as supplies last. This type of class is offered once a year.



DHS obtains exhibit space at key agricultural events in the state. For instance, DHS typically has a booth at the Farm Bureau Annual Conference, Iowa's Fruit & Vegetable Growers Conference, and participates in the IDALS annual training for WIC and FMNP vendors. In 2009, DHS staff had a booth and presented at the Food Security Coalition conference in Des Moines. DHS also works with IDALS and the Department of Public Health on a regular basis for EBT activities related to WIC and FMNP. In addition, DHS submits written articles to various agricultural journals/magazines to further promote the Wireless Project. For further information, please visit the Iowa Department of Human Services at http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/Consumers/Assistance_Programs/FoodAssistance/FarmersMarket.html